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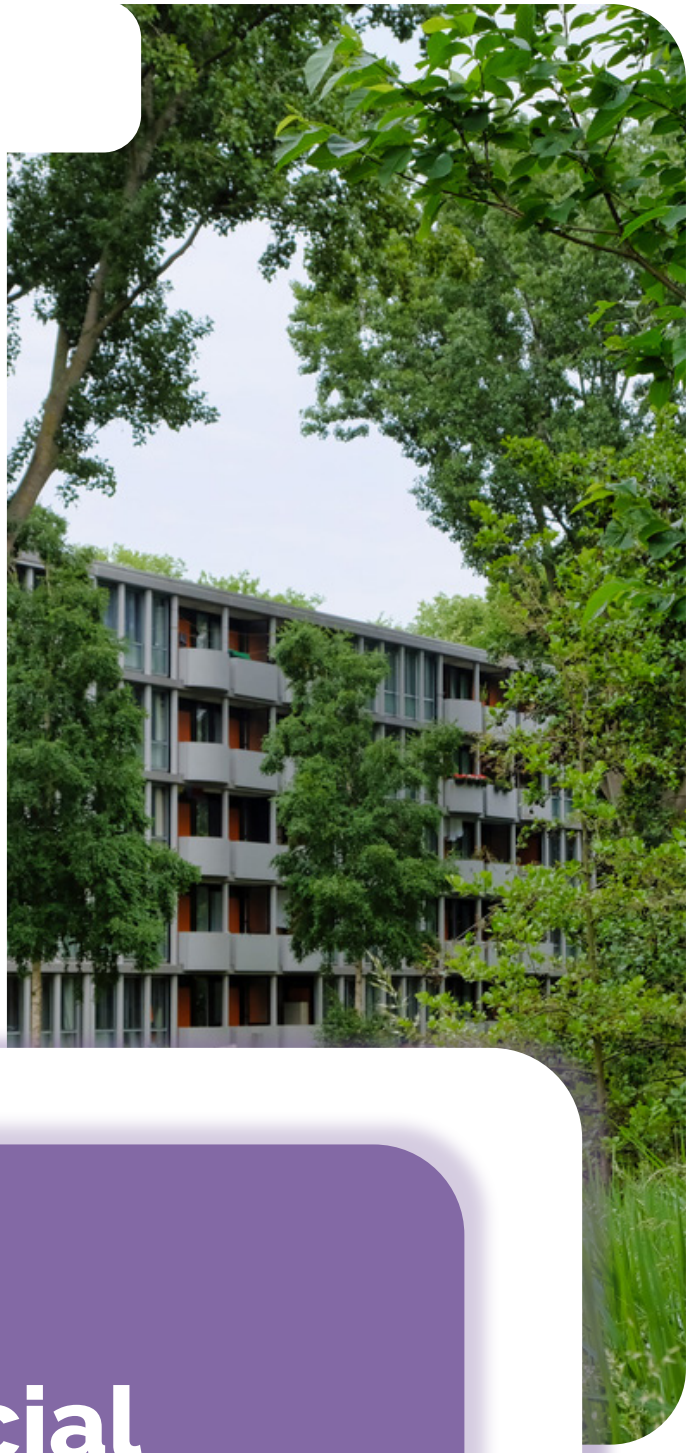

Measuring social cohesion in housing

International lessons

A report by the
Local Government Information Unit (LGIU)

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The Housing Agency

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background and context

Ireland faces an acute social cohesion crisis at the intersection of rapid demographic transformation, severe housing shortages, and rising community tensions in some areas. High-profile anti-immigration protests and violent disturbances around asylum seeker and refugee accommodation highlighted integration and cohesion challenges that the government has sought to address. The housing crisis compounds these pressures: a deficit of available homes, high numbers of people in emergency accommodation, particularly in areas such as Dublin, and many asylum seekers without adequate accommodation. The government's *Delivering Homes, Building Communities 2025-30* strategy explicitly recognises that housing decisions carry long-term social consequences, emphasising mixed tenure and community programming to create inclusive neighbourhoods where diverse residents can develop trust and belonging.

The government has a longstanding commitment to increasing social cohesion, but measurement and assessment of the impact of interventions in a housing context remain underdeveloped. Recently established Local Authority Integration Teams (LAIT) across all 31 local authorities indicate a direct response to integration pressures. These teams focus on integrating international protection applicants, refugees, and Ukrainian displaced persons by connecting them with local services, healthcare, English-language supports, and employment opportunities, as well as organising community events to bring different groups together. Measuring outcomes achieved through this initiative, as well as wider attempts to boost cohesion, is a crucial, and as yet elusive, piece of the puzzle.

Research question and methodology

This research, conducted by Andrew Walker and the Local Government Information Unit for the Housing Agency, examines the following question:

Do local and municipal authorities in different jurisdictions measure and evaluate housing-based interventions intended to increase social cohesion? If so, how?

A comparative case study approach analysed measurement practices across six countries grouped by scale of social housing provision: England, the Netherlands, Germany, Austria, and Denmark. Seven semi-structured interviews with Irish local authority officials provided detailed context on current practice, challenges and aspirations for social cohesion measurement.

Interview findings

Semi-structured interviews with housing directors, community specialists, integration coordinators, and community development workers across Irish local authorities revealed fundamental gaps between housing delivery and social cohesion measurement. The most striking finding was structural separation between housing and community functions: housing departments concentrate on delivery targets, allocations, and maintenance with minimal cohesion metrics, while community departments handle integration and engagement but lack robust impact measures beyond participation counts. Multiple interviewees immediately redirected cohesion questions to colleagues, suggesting it *"sits with somebody else,"* though the quality of cross-departmental relationships varied significantly between authorities.

Officials emphasised that local authority capacity to deliver housing has eroded over decades through reduced staffing, limited capital finance access, and constrained borrowing powers. Authorities lack systematic approaches to measuring cohesion, with existing administrative data fragmented across departments and no single source capturing cohesion dimensions comprehensively. Interviewees consistently emphasised the urgent need to move beyond counting activities to measuring impact, the need for demonstration projects illustrating good practice, and requests for *"guidance or direction"* on measurement approaches. As one housing director stated, authorities *"effectively have to muddle our way around when these issues blow up,"* while a community official noted the ethical tension: *"I'm taking money from the most disadvantaged to give it to a university...that's a hard line to live on."* The novelty of Local Authority Integration Teams (some established only in early 2025) offers opportunities for closer alignment between housing and community functions, though the sector is still developing its approach in real-time amid crisis conditions.

Five measurement models

The case studies in this report demonstrate a range of approaches to measuring social cohesion with varying resource demands and sustainability:

1. Embedded model (measurement integrated into permanent service delivery),

2. Partnership model (academic-municipal collaborations),

3. Municipal data infrastructure model (new city-wide data collection integrating existing data),

4. Pragmatic integration model (indicators drawing on existing surveys), and
5. Cooperative governance model (resident-led measurement).

No model simultaneously achieves low resource use, strong sustainability, and high measurement depth.

Implications for Ireland

The pragmatic integration model offers the most immediately feasible approach: adding cohesion questions to existing Local Economic and Community Plans consultations and convening cross-departmental meetings between housing, community development, and integration teams. Sustainable measurement requires pragmatic foundations building on administrative data already collected, embedding indicators in existing surveys, and maintaining simple, replicable methods. Partnerships—academic-municipal and multi-stakeholder—are essential infrastructure that few authorities develop independently. Shared infrastructure across Ireland's 31 local authorities could provide comparative benchmarking and analytical capacity no single authority could sustain alone.

Conclusions

Authorities in several jurisdictions do measure social cohesion in housing contexts, but practice remains neither universal nor standardised. Most measurement occurs during special funding periods and rarely continues afterwards, directly mirroring Ireland's situation where comprehensive measurement competes with immediate service delivery. Effective approaches integrate measurement into housing governance rather than treating it as standalone technical exercise, though this requires sustained resourcing. Given resource constraints, approaches leveraging existing administrative data, embedded survey indicators, and simple replicable methods offer the most sustainable path forward within current Irish local authority capacity.

Introduction

The Irish government's current focus on social cohesion emerges from a confluence of unprecedented demographic transformation, acute housing pressures, and episodes of civil unrest that have fundamentally challenged the nation's historically stable social fabric. The country has experienced a demographic shift, with 20% of the population now born outside the country and net migration reaching 79,300 people in the year to April 2024 (Central Statistics Office, 2025). This has coincided with a severe housing crisis, creating what researchers describe as a "perfect us versus them narrative" (Economic and Social Research Institute) that has manifested in a level of violent disturbance unseen in modern Irish history (Gardaí estimated 476 anti-immigration protests occurred between 2022-2023).

Ireland's housing shortage sits at the epicentre of social cohesion challenges, creating competition for scarce resources that fuels community tensions. The nation faces a housing deficit, which the Housing Commission calculates to be between 212,500 and 256,000 homes, with only 30,330 new dwellings completed in 2024, falling well short of the Central Bank's assessment that 52,000 new homes are needed annually (Social Justice Ireland, 2024), while the government's most recent plans are to deliver 300,000 homes by 2030. By December 2025, some 12,067 people were in emergency accommodation in the Dublin region, representing a large increase in homelessness, including in family and child homelessness, over a decade (Dublin Region Homelessness Executive 2025).

This crisis intersects with immigration and asylum policy: in 2024, Ireland received 18,561 International Protection applications, the highest number ever recorded (International Protection Office 2024), yet by December of that year, 3,001 asylum seekers were without accommodation (European Council on Refugees and Exiles 2024). The accommodation crisis extends far beyond the integration of asylum seekers and refugees, with 41% of those aged 18-34 living with parents due to unaffordability, and median house prices reaching €375,000 by August 2025 (Central Statistics Office 2025).

The Irish government's commitment to social cohesion is longstanding, however, (Dept. of the Taoiseach 2016), and the policy debate surrounding integration of migrant communities goes back further (Fanning 2009; Grotti et al 2024). The most recent articulation of the current policy approach is in *Delivering Homes, Building Communities 2025-30: an Action Plan on Housing Supply and Targeting Homelessness (2025)*, which includes the goals of ending homelessness, providing housing for older people and supporting social inclusion.

The strategy explicitly recognises that physical housing decisions carry long-term social consequences, deliberately moving away from the segregated social housing estates that historically created concentrated disadvantage. By emphasising tenure mixing, social infrastructure

investment, and community programming alongside housing delivery, the Action Plan aims to create inclusive neighbourhoods where residents from diverse backgrounds can develop trust, belonging, and meaningful connections.

Furthermore, the government established Local Authority Integration Teams (LAIT) in 2024 across all 31 local authorities in response to integration pressures. These teams focus specifically on integrating international protection applicants, refugees, and Ukrainian displaced persons by connecting them with local services, healthcare, English language supports, and employment opportunities, as well as organising community events to bring different groups together (Local Authority Integration Teams | Local Government Ireland)

The government has developed measurement infrastructure with potential application to housing-cohesion monitoring. The CSO's Well-being Dashboard and experimental social cohesion indicators developed after the 2022 Census provide a foundation for local-level adaptation, while ESRI's 2023-2024 work on spatial inequality using the Pobal HP Deprivation Index demonstrates how small-area data can track neighbourhood-level disadvantage over time (ESRI, 2024). This index provides comprehensive indicators on unemployment, education, health, and ethnic diversity at scales directly relevant to local authority planning. Systematic tenant satisfaction surveys, already used by Approved Housing Bodies to measure community attachment and stability, offer models for broader application (Circle VHA, 2023). The Housing Agency's community engagement pilots similarly provide frameworks that could inform cohesion measurement approaches tailored to local authority contexts.

Yet significant challenges remain in how to design and deliver interventions to boost and maintain social cohesion across Ireland's diverse communities. Local authorities tasked with building houses and ensuring integrated, strong and sustainable communities face significant resource and capacity pressures that might be alleviated by a clearer measurement of cohesion.

The research presented in this paper was conducted by Andrew Walker and the Local Government Information Unit (LGIU), supported and funded by the Housing Agency. It seeks to examine how local authorities in other jurisdictions measure and evaluate housing-based interventions designed to strengthen social cohesion. The work responds to growing pressures on community integration in Ireland, exemplified by recent unrest, alongside the challenges posed by rapid demographic change, a severe housing crisis, and stretched local authority resources. The central research question is whether councils across different jurisdictions systematically measure and evaluate housing interventions intended to increase social cohesion, and if so, what methods and frameworks they employ. This comparative analysis

aims to support Irish local authorities in developing more robust approaches to understanding and strengthening social cohesion through housing policy and practice.

Method statement

The question this paper seeks to answer, therefore, is:

Do local and municipal authorities in different jurisdictions measure and evaluate housing-based interventions that are intended to increase and strengthen social cohesion? If so, how?

To explore this question, the research employed a comparative case study approach to examine how local authorities measure and evaluate housing-based interventions intended to strengthen social cohesion, including, but not limited to, the integration of migrant communities. Six countries were selected across three groups, reflecting different levels of comparability with Ireland. Specifically, the three-tier selection strategy reflects different scales of social housing provision, shaping both the policy context and measurement infrastructure available for cohesion measurement.

Group 1: Mixed-market systems

The United Kingdom, specifically England, and the Netherlands were selected for their structural similarities to Ireland in social housing provision and governance arrangements. They represent mixed-market systems where social housing constitutes a moderate but significant portion of the total housing stock, operating within predominantly market-driven housing systems facing acute supply pressures and growing affordability challenges. Both share comparable challenges around housing supply pressures, migration-driven diversity, and the increasing prominence of social cohesion in housing policy discourse.

Group 2: Large-scale municipal provision

Germany and Austria represent countries with more developed and comprehensive approaches to social housing as a tool for social cohesion. Both countries have large-scale municipal housing provision. Vienna's Gemeindebau alone houses over 500,000 residents across 220,000 units (representing over 40 per cent of the city's housing), demonstrating one of Europe's most established frameworks for integrating affordable housing with community development objectives. Germany's cooperative federal model and recent legislative emphasis on "vibrant neighbourhoods mixes" provide insights into structured approaches to social sustainability.

Group 3: Sophisticated democratic housing models

Denmark was selected as exemplary of tenant democracy and cooperative housing governance. Its national social housing system, with distinctive tenant democracy structures and universal accessibility, represents best-in-class practice for resident involvement in housing governance.

This selection strategy enabled both horizontal comparison across different contexts and aspirational learning from more developed social housing systems, while maintaining analytical coherence through a shared focus on measurement practices, evaluation frameworks, and the relationship between housing interventions and social cohesion outcomes. Background information on each country and the case study sites was gathered through a literature review (Housing Agency 2020).

Ireland

Seven semi-structured interviews were conducted with senior housing and community development officials across Irish local authorities to develop a detailed understanding of social cohesion challenges and aspirations for measurement within Irish local government. Interviews were conducted with the following key informants:

- housing directors and managers responsible for delivery and allocation
- community development specialists and social inclusion coordinators
- integration team leads (Local Authority Integration Teams)
- community development workers engaged in direct service provision.

The semi-structured format employed a targeted set of questions while allowing flexibility for participants to elaborate on themes and issues that emerged during conversation. Questions were tailored to different roles: housing officials were asked about delivery targets, tenure mix decisions, and site selection criteria, while community officials were asked about engagement strategies, integration programming, and measurement of participation. Cross-cutting themes explored with all interviewees included: definitions and understanding of social cohesion; current measurement practices and data collection; organisational structures and processes; resource constraints and capacity challenges; and knowledge of international or comparative practice.

Interviews were transcribed, anonymised, and findings were analysed thematically to identify patterns across authorities.

Context and background

Measuring and defining social cohesion

Despite widespread policy use, social cohesion remains contested. Jenson (1998) observed that there is no single way of understanding even the definitional dimensions, with variations depending on the problem being addressed. Jenson's five dimensions of cohesion remain widely cited. They are:

- belonging versus isolation;
- inclusion versus exclusion;
- participation versus non-involvement;
- recognition versus rejection; and
- legitimacy versus illegitimacy.

Chan et al. (2006) critiqued this framework, arguing that inclusion and recognition are better understood as conditions that promote cohesion rather than constituent elements. Indeed, they identified a widespread confusion between cohesion as a phenomenon and factors that promote or result from it. Understanding this is crucial for connecting interventions to outcomes and impact.

Kearns and Forrest's urban framework (2000) identified five elements relevant for local authorities:

- common values and civic culture,
- social order and social control,
- social solidarity and reductions in wealth disparities,
- social networks and social capital, and
- territorial belonging and identity.

Critically, they cautioned that social cohesion at neighbourhood level is not unambiguously positive—a city can consist of socially cohesive but increasingly divided neighbourhoods, where stronger local ties correlate with greater conflict between communities. Meanwhile, Schiefer and van der Noll (2017) synthesised literature identifying six core components:

- trust (interpersonal and institutional),
- identification with the social entity,
- shared values;
- social networks and participation,
- orientation toward the common good, and
- equality.

More recently, the British Academy's Cohesive Societies Programme developed a multidisciplinary framework identifying five interconnected elements:

- identity and belonging,
- the social economy,
- social responsibility,
- cultural memory and tradition,
- and care for the future (British Academy, 2019).

This framework emphasises that cohesion extends beyond social connections or absence of conflict to encompass economic, cultural, and temporal dimensions.

This project will draw on both these definitions, as well as Jeannotte's (2003) definition developed for the Canadian government and will adopt the following as a definition of social cohesion:

> *"The ongoing capacity of a society to ensure the well-being of all members, minimising disparities and marginalisation, while promoting trust, a sense of belonging and opportunity."*

This definition is useful for our study because it encapsulates tangible metrics, including health, economic and educational, as well as less tangible outcomes, such as trust, belonging, that local governments might seek to promote. Yet whether and how they measure these outcomes is the main question of the research.

Cohesion is notoriously difficult to measure because it is an inherently multidimensional and abstract concept that resists reduction to a simple,

single set of indicators. Researchers must rely on proxy indicators like survey responses about feelings of belonging, participation in civic activities, or levels of intergroup conflict, but these measures often fail to capture the nuanced reality of how cohesive a society actually is. Additionally, cohesion operates at multiple scales simultaneously (individual, group, community, society), and what constitutes "strong cohesion" can vary dramatically across cultures, contexts, and time periods, making it difficult to develop universally applicable measurement tools or meaningful benchmarks for comparison. It is also challenging to isolate specific factors in order to assess their impact on cohesion.

It is therefore extremely challenging to develop standardised metrics that satisfy all perspectives or allow meaningful comparisons. As such, it is useful to investigate more local uses of the idea and the ways in which municipalities use indicators to understand the strength of cohesion in neighbourhoods and communities.

Abrams, Davies, and Horsham's (2023) rapid review for the UK Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities examined 23 data sources, capturing over 300 measurement items across 23 aspects of cohesion. Critically, no single source captured all aspects, and coverage was inconsistent. Most commonly measured aspects included social trust, belonging and identity, civic engagement, tolerance toward others, and political engagement. The review organised measures into six themes: trust, identity, local connections, prejudice and intergroup relations, politics and social order, and external indicators. The review identified four critical areas:

1. Definitions and conceptualisation: Measures should capture at least one of the five British Academy elements while distinguishing cohesion from its antecedents or consequences. For example, inequality may damage cohesion, but should not be measured as a direct indicator of cohesion itself.

2. Level of locality: Social cohesion operates differently at various scales. More frequent measurement is recommended at local levels where fluctuations are more pronounced. Regional measurements may mask critical local variations.

3. Relational dimensions: Because cohesion is inherently relational, measurement must capture connections across levels and groupings; intergroup and intragroup dimensions; both behaviours and perceptions; and actual conditions and perceived changes. Cohesion requires measuring people's perceptions of and relationships with one another, not just aggregate behaviours.

4. Comparability and usability: Measures should enable comparison across communities and tracking over time while remaining sensitive to local contexts. Data must be accessible and interpretable for practitioners.

Evaluating housing-based interventions

Evaluating social cohesion interventions presents distinct methodological challenges. Traditional housing policy metrics focusing on units delivered or physical quality provide limited insight into cohesion outcomes (Clapham, 2018). More holistic evaluation frameworks incorporating both quantitative measures and qualitative assessment are required but remain underdeveloped in many jurisdictions, including Ireland (Murphy et al., 2019).

The OECD's framework for measuring social cohesion offers potential metrics around social inclusion, social capital, and social mobility that could be adapted to housing interventions (OECD, 2011). However, collection of such data at neighbourhoods scale remains challenging. Meanwhile, longitudinal assessment presents particular challenges, with many cohesion outcomes only becoming apparent over extended timeframes. Studies of European housing interventions suggest that meaningful evaluation requires minimum five-year timeframes, with ten-year assessments providing more reliable insights into sustainable impact (Kleinhans & van Ham, 2016).

Attribution problems further complicate evaluation, as housing interventions occur alongside other social, economic, and policy changes that influence cohesion outcomes (Atkinson & Kintrea, 2001).

Social cohesion challenges in Ireland

The current context

Ireland faces an intensifying social cohesion crisis around housing. There has been an increase in the number of protests across the country related to asylum seeker and refugee accommodation, concentrated particularly around placements of single men in communities already experiencing housing pressure. Violent incidents have escalated from community resistance to arson attacks. Meanwhile, ESRI research confirms the link between housing pressure and community tensions: people living in more disadvantaged communities demonstrate more negative attitudes toward immigration (Laurence et al 2025).

Social cohesion challenges manifest differently across urban, small-town, and rural contexts, requiring differentiated local authority responses. Small-

town protests in places like Roscrea (population 5,542 accommodating 691 international protection applicants) and Dromahair (939 residents facing 155 refugees representing a 16% population increase) reflect fundamentally different dynamics than Dublin's Coolock or East Wall. In rural and small-town contexts, placement scale relative to existing population creates disproportionate demographic change and acute service pressure on limited infrastructure, such as single GP practices, small schools, and tight-knit social networks where newcomer visibility is high. Conversely, urban challenges centre on cumulative impacts when multiple facilities concentrate in already-deprived neighbourhoods, creating service strain across healthcare, education, and transport.

The Housing Assistance Payment and private rental

A large number of people with long-term housing needs in the private rented sector rely on the Housing Assistance Payment (HAP). Local authorities administer HAP by paying rent directly to landlords, with tenants contributing differential rent based on income. Unlike estate-based social housing, where authorities can facilitate community development activities, HAP creates dispersed populations requiring different support approaches that most authorities have not yet developed. Cohesion-building, therefore, increasingly occurs beyond traditional local authority oversight.

First, local authorities lose direct oversight of community dynamics when households are scattered across private rental accommodation. Second, rent limits risk creating new concentrations of lower-income households in more affordable areas, potentially replicating mono-tenure problems without the physical markers of traditional social housing estates. Finally, HAP recipients face insecurity comparable to standard private tenancies, undermining residential stability that supports cohesion.

The Traveller community

Irish Travellers face distinctive and longstanding social cohesion challenges. While local authorities hold statutory responsibility for Traveller accommodation under the Housing (Traveller Accommodation) Act 1998, implementation remains uneven across local council jurisdictions. Designated halting sites and group housing schemes often reinforce spatial separation from settled communities rather than supporting integration.

Travellers experience barriers across multiple domains relevant to cohesion: discrimination in private rental markets limits housing choices; inadequate provision and poor maintenance of authorised sites create substandard living conditions; and unauthorised encampments generate community tensions and enforcement actions. These patterns reflect and perpetuate mutual mistrust between Traveller and settled populations.

For local authorities, Traveller accommodation presents a complex challenge requiring not only physical provision but also addressing deeply embedded prejudice. Public misconceptions about resource allocation fuel social tensions, while inadequate consultation mechanisms mean Traveller voices remain marginalised in housing planning processes. The intersection of ethnic identity with economic disadvantage creates compounded exclusion that standard housing interventions may not address effectively without culturally informed approaches and meaningful community engagement.

Asylum seekers and refugee integration

Ireland's Direct Provision system presents significant integration challenges. Research demonstrates that prolonged periods in accommodation centres create multiple obstacles to community participation (Ní Raghallaigh & Foreman, 2016). The transition from Direct Provision into communities compounds challenges, as former asylum seekers encounter severe difficulties accessing private rental accommodation within an already constrained market. Limited knowledge of community services and support systems increases risks of social isolation precisely when integration opportunities are most critical.

International evidence confirms that detention and extended waiting periods have lasting implications for social cohesion even after status determination (Filges et al., 2015). For local authorities, supporting refugee integration requires coordinated approaches encompassing housing access, service navigation, and community connections—resources often lacking in current arrangements.

Current integration practice

Acknowledging this context, Ireland's housing-cohesion challenges sit within a broader policy infrastructure that shapes local authority responsibilities and resources. The Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP), managed through Local Community Development Committees (LCDCs), represents the state's primary community development framework with direct relevance to housing-based cohesion work. The Economic and Social Research Institute's (ESRI) evaluation of SICAP identified indicators directly applicable to housing contexts, including measures of community participation, links between groups and service providers, and improved cooperation (ESRI, 2017). Local Economic and Community Plans (LECPs), introduced under the 2014 Local Government Reform Act, have provided statutory frameworks where housing and community development objectives intersect. The National Migrant Integration Strategy (2017-2023) and its forthcoming successor establish integration goals that local housing authorities must operationalise and the Department of Education's DEIS Programme for educational disadvantage

also affects neighbourhood cohesion outcomes in areas with concentrated social housing.

One of the more significant changes to local community engagement and cohesion infrastructure is the Integration Teams that were established in local authorities in Ireland following the White Paper on Ending Direct Provision and expanded through the International Protection Integration Fund. The teams are still new: some major city teams were only established in early 2025, and they support individuals in a variety of activities, including accessing public services and further education, with a crucial emphasis in many areas on navigating routes into employment.

Interview findings

Departmental separation

Interviews with local authority officials, for this research project, revealed a significant gap between housing delivery and social cohesion measurement. There was a general sense of confusion among many of the local authorities interviewed about what social cohesion means and how to measure it. This linked to critical questions, also highlighted in interviews, about who is responsible for fostering it. While local authority housing departments focus primarily on delivery targets, allocations, and tenure mix with minimal social cohesion metrics, community departments handle integration and engagement, but interviewees identified a lack of robust impact measures beyond numbers participating in community events.

The most striking finding across interviews was the structural separation between housing and community functions within local authorities. Housing departments concentrate on delivery targets, allocations, and maintenance with minimal attention to social cohesion metrics, while community departments handle integration, events, and engagement but struggle with impact measurement. Multiple interviewees immediately redirected questions about social cohesion to community colleagues, suggesting that it *"sits with somebody else"*. This context is mirrored at the national level, with separate departments for housing, local government and heritage, and another for community, rural and Gaeltacht affairs.

However, the quality of cross-departmental relationships varied significantly between authorities. Some demonstrated better cooperation than others, with housing and community colleagues working in close physical and professional proximity. One interviewee noted:

> ***"I'm really lucky here. [My housing colleague] sits three doors down from me...I have real respect for what he does, and I hope and think vice versa, and he's been really responsive when there have been new estates where there's been opportunity for implementing community associations."***

Local authorities face a fundamental challenge: delivering housing at scale while building cohesive communities, with minimal resources for measuring whether social cohesion is actually improving. As one housing director put it: *"We effectively have to muddle our way around when these issues blow up."* One official said that *"the [housing] targets have to be met, that's the bottom line..."*, while another argued that:

> ***"tenure mix is a good idea but will slow down the delivery of social housing and we have a lot of people on the waiting list."***

The departmental separation between housing delivery and community development reflects both organisational structures and the overwhelming pressure of housing targets. Without clear definitions, adequate resources, or robust measurement systems, social cohesion remains an aspiration rather than a measurable outcome. One official in a community-focussed team said:

> *"I have a very limited budget for the city...focused on those at risk or those most in need of social inclusion, so to pull money away from a service to research...I'm taking money from the most disadvantaged to give it to a university. So, I'm actually giving it to the most privileged, that's a hard line to live on."*

However, the local authority integration teams (LAITs) offer an opportunity for the two functional areas to be more closely aligned. As some teams were less than 18 months old at the time of interviewing, the sector appeared to be still developing its approach to addressing integration and social cohesion in real-time amid a housing crisis and rising social tensions.

A critical point that was also made by interviewees was the urgent need to move beyond counting activities to measuring impact, while recognising the ethical and practical challenges of doing so within severely constrained budgets. As one interviewee noted: *"It's also hard to advocate for further resources without showing impact."* This creates a problem that requires creative solutions and potentially dedicated research funding that doesn't compete with direct service provision.

Local authorities now navigate multiple housing delivery models simultaneously, including:

- direct provision of social housing,
- Part V agreements with private developers (which require that developers provide up to 20% of new housing for social and affordable purposes),
- partnerships with Approved Housing Bodies, and
- HAP administration in the private rental sector.

Each model creates different cohesion opportunities and challenges, yet coordination mechanisms remain weak.

Knowledge gaps

Interviewees consistently emphasised the need for demonstration projects illustrating good practice in mixed tenure and cohesion-building. Showcasing high-quality developments was identified as critical for generating interest, changing perceptions, and promoting innovation. Currently, authorities operate with limited systematic evidence about what approaches work in Irish contexts, particularly regarding:

- appropriate measurement frameworks calibrated to local authority scales and resources
- effectiveness of community engagement strategies for diverse populations, including refugees, Travellers, and established residents
- the impact of design features supporting social interaction across tenure types
- preventive interventions addressing early signs of cohesion breakdown.

The absence of systematic evaluation and knowledge-sharing mechanisms means that lessons from successful initiatives remain localised rather than informing practice nationally. This represents a significant missed opportunity for capacity development across the local authority sector.

Economic inequality and anti-social behaviour

Economic inequality manifests spatially through concentrated disadvantage in particular neighbourhoods. Where trust and collective efficacy are weak, anti-social behaviour both reflects and reinforces cohesion deficits, creating feedback loops of declining social control and increasing fear. For local authorities, anti-social behaviour complaints serve as potential indicators of cohesion breakdown, though systematic data collection remains limited.

In interviews with officials, community safety issues emerged as a significant barrier to social cohesion. In one city, anti-social behaviour was described as *"so present and a big factor"* that residents are reluctant to participate in community initiatives. Burglary and assault were identified as major concerns, creating an atmosphere where *"community action is very difficult as people are afraid".*

One city measures complaints about anti-social activity as one indicator of cohesion, noting that while some level of anti-social behaviour and drug activity will always exist, reducing complaint levels is viewed as a positive sign. The relationship between community sustainability and addressing anti-social behaviour was seen as crucial, particularly in larger estates.

The stigmatisation of social housing means that anti-social behaviour in affected areas receives disproportionate attention, reinforcing negative perceptions regardless of actual incidence rates compared to other neighbourhoods. Interviewees acknowledged that social housing carries a stigma and that there is a need to change perceptions.

Capacity and resources

Multiple interviewees emphasised that local authority capacity to directly deliver housing has eroded over decades, to the detriment of the Irish housing system. Reduced staffing, limited access to capital finance, and constrained borrowing powers restrict authorities' ability to plan effectively for housing delivery. While large local authorities could potentially support smaller authorities through shared services in financial, architectural, and scheme supervision functions, current resource limitations prevent this regional coordination.

Measurement and data limitations

Local authorities lack systematic approaches to measuring social cohesion. Existing administrative data sources—including census information, housing waiting lists, HAP recipient data, and anti-social behaviour reports—are fragmented across departments and agencies. No single source captures cohesion dimensions comprehensively.

More frequent and localised measurement would provide actionable data, but demands investment that many authorities cannot sustain. Survey-based approaches capturing residents' subjective experiences were seen as desirable by those interviewed, but they are resource-intensive.

Interviewees highlighted the need for "guidance or direction" on measurement approaches, suggesting that individual authorities struggle to develop appropriate frameworks independently. Coordination between authorities could ensure common measurement elements alongside locally adapted components, facilitating aggregation for regional and national planning. However, such coordination mechanisms are currently underdeveloped.

Netherlands

Case study 1. Plan Einstein, Utrecht

In 2015, Utrecht had to accommodate over 600 asylum seekers under Dutch national policy. Officials faced twin pressures: providing reception facilities and addressing residents' concerns about housing scarcity. Utrecht combined asylum reception centres with housing for local residents through a co-housing model. The development in 2021 of a new centre included 30 standalone units for first-time buyers and studio apartments located on the same street as the asylum seeker centre. Local young people live alongside asylum seekers, creating natural relationship-building opportunities while addressing community concerns about resource allocation.

Rather than offering only language or cultural orientation classes (which reinforce helper-helped dynamics), Plan Einstein provided professional development open to all residents. Over 280 individuals participated in English courses and around 200 in entrepreneurship programs. Activities included art, sport, music, and food programs accessible to everyone. The project also created accessible, safe, attractive neighbourhood hubs with hosts facilitating informal connections through spontaneous interactions.

Launched in 2016 through EU Urban Innovative Actions funding, "Plan Einstein" reframed integration as a reciprocal partnership between new arrivals and existing communities. The focus was on joint participation rather than one-way support, combining co-housing, professional development, and inclusive social activities. The pilot site supported by the EU-funded project is no longer operational, but Utrecht now has four Plan Einstein locations across the city, each applying the core principles flexibly in different contexts. The current locations accommodate 350 people in total, including young people in small and studio apartments, and asylum seeker/refugee accommodation

Measurement approach

Comprehensive evaluation was integral from the start, with extensive measurement conducted by Utrecht and Oxford universities (Oliver, Geuijen & Dekker, 2019). During the 2016–2019 pilot, the City of Utrecht's Social Development Department oversaw monitoring and evaluation, partnering with Utrecht University, Oxford's COMPAS, and University College London (Gemeente Utrecht, n.d.; Healthy Urban Living Utrecht, n.d.).

Key indicators included:

- Participation metrics: enrolment, completion, and 117 recorded activities (Gemeente Utrecht, n.d.; Portico Urban Stories, n.d.).

Case studies

- Network indicators: 74% reported improved networks and cross-group connections (Oliver et al (2019), n.d.).
- Neighbourhood attitudes: annual resident surveys on perceptions of asylum centres.
- Individual outcomes: self-reported wellbeing, belonging, productivity, and reduced isolation (Portico Urban Initiative, n.d.).
- Reciprocal involvement: participant co-production and leadership in local activities (Gemeente Utrecht, n.d.).
- Methods:
- Quantitative: attendance logs, demographic data, structured surveys, COA and Statistics Netherlands data (Oliver, Geuijen & Dekker, 2019).
- Qualitative: interviews, focus groups, testimonials, and participant stories (Gemeente Utrecht, n.d.).
- Longitudinal: repeated measures comparing pre-, mid-, and post-project outcomes (Portico Urban Stories, n.d.).

Systematic evaluation ended when EU funding expired. Current municipal practice is unsystematic due to limited resources. Officials acknowledge that multiple factors affect neighbourhood cohesion, making attribution difficult. Monitoring now focuses mainly on activity outputs and individual outcomes rather than neighbourhood-level cohesion.

Plan Einstein demonstrates that while municipalities can sustain inclusive reception policies, rigorous cohesion measurement requires ongoing resources and partnerships.

Case study 2. Kuiperwijk Noord, Delft

Kuyperwijk Noord, located in the northern part of Delft within the wider Voordijkshoorn district, provides a valuable example of how general social cohesion challenges, not necessarily related to migrant integration, intersect with the difficulties of defining and measuring cohesion at neighbourhood scale. Developed during the post-war housing expansion of the 1950s–1970s, the area has seen relatively little physical renewal compared with adjacent neighbourhoods that have benefited from more sustained investment.

This limited reinvestment, coupled with economic and demographic pressures, has contributed to a decline in perceived social cohesion. Safety concerns and feelings of insecurity stem from poor lighting in public spaces,

traffic issues, and high crime rates. Only 36% of residents wanted to stay in the neighbourhood and just 20% felt connected to it.

Around 65% of housing in Kuyperwijk Noord consists of social rental stock, compared with 37% in the wider Voordijkshoorn district. Average gross personal income is approximately €21,600, significantly below the district average of €28,700 (CBS, 2019) and the population is comparatively young.

The intervention strategy followed a phased approach with immediate actions (0–2 years) including a community garden and community space; medium-term interventions (2–5 years) focusing on child-friendly spaces, permanent pedestrian streets and the creation of "KuyperControle", a neighbourhoods watch team to address safety concerns through co-production with police; improved lighting and the "Kuypercafé" terrace run by volunteers, improved lighting strategy, and converting the street to one-way traffic.

The implementation reflected a multi-partner governance model in which the municipality worked collaboratively with housing associations, entrepreneurs, social work, and community police officers, taking a facilitative rather than directive role to bring residents and partners together so that ideas emerged organically from the community.

Measurement approach

Evaluation of cohesion in Kuyperwijk was conducted as part of the City Deal Kennis Maken Delft, a collaboration between the Municipality of Delft, TU Delft, The Hague University of Applied Sciences, and Inholland University of Applied Sciences. TU Delft contributed spatial analysis and social research expertise, while students engaged in data collection and design proposals.

TU Delft researchers identified four interrelated cohesion challenges:

1. Low neighbourhood pride,
2. Limited social interaction among residents,
3. Weak community organisation, and
4. Underused public spaces.

The research team observed that social, economic, and physical aspects were closely interconnected in the Kuyperwijk, making it difficult to isolate the sources or outcomes of cohesion decline and, therefore, to design precise measures of change. The project did not establish neighbourhood-specific quantitative metrics for social cohesion. Instead, it drew context from national and city-level instruments such as:

- The Dutch Central Bureau for Statistics (CBS) indicators on voluntary work, trust, and social contact, and
- The Leefbaarometer (Liveability Monitor), which includes a cohesion component derived from postcode-level data.

While the Leefbaarometer can approximate subdistrict trends, it does not adequately capture fine-grained neighbourhood dynamics or short-term changes from local interventions. The project team referred to these datasets for background context rather than as ongoing monitoring tools.

This partnership brought analytical depth to evaluation and linked academic and municipal actors in joint experimentation. However, it also revealed a familiar gap between research insight and operational measurement: while the collaboration yielded a rich qualitative understanding, it did not produce a formalised or ongoing system to monitor changes in cohesion over time.

England

Case study 3. Marmalade Lane, Cambridge – cohousing and community model

Marmalade Lane is a 42-home co-housing development completed in 2018-2019 in Cambridge, with around 100 residents. Cambridge City Council enabled the project as landowner, allocating the site after the 2008 financial crisis, collaborating on the client brief, and running a developer selection process that brought TOWN, a co-housing developer with sites across the UK, Trivselhus, a Swedish housebuilder, and Mole Architects into partnership with Cambridge Cohousing Ltd, which comprises all residents as members. The council provided initial funding and project management but transitioned design, construction, management, and evaluation responsibility to the partnership.

Measurement approach

Partnerships were crucial to tracking cohesion. Five years after completion, TOWN partnered with Greengage, a consultancy with expertise in social value assessments, to conduct a comprehensive post-occupancy evaluation measuring outcomes for residents and the wider community (TOWN, 2024). Cambridge Cohousing provided management records and resident participation. Cambridge City Council was not directly involved in primary data collection or evaluation. Rather, its role was early facilitation and procurement.

Case studies

A longitudinal five-year approach captured established behavioural patterns that were seen to persist, providing insight into sustained cohesion. A mixed-methods approach combined:

- A survey of 42 residents that examined living experience and wellbeing impacts.
- Analysis of facility usage, participation rates, and community activities.
- Participatory observation facilitated by a TOWN team member who is also a long-term resident.
- Social value measurement, in which Greengage applied HACT Social Value Bank (UK Social Value Bank | Demonstrating Social Value | HACT) and The Social Value Portal's TOM systems (Measurement | Social Value TOM System™ | Social Value Portal) to quantify impact with a monetary value, frameworks widely adopted across UK social housing and aligned with government evaluation standards. The indicators include the proportion of residents who regularly stop and talk with neighbours, who feel they could go to the neighbour for advice, and levels of active involvement in tenant and social groups.

Marmalade Lane demonstrates that proxies for social cohesion can be evaluated and quantified through a combination of resident surveys, behavioural data, standardised social value tools, and longitudinal observation. Partnership working is an essential component, bringing capacity and expertise that the council alone might not be able to provide.

Case study 4. London Borough of Tower Hamlets - local Area Action Plan

Tower Hamlets Council developed systematic cohesion measurement during development of its Leaside Area Action Plan (London Borough of Tower Hamlets 2020). The AAP area (predominantly Lansbury and Bromley South wards) presents acute cohesion challenges, including diverse linguistic, national and cultural backgrounds, low levels of English spoken, high levels of deprivation and child poverty, as well as major roads, train lines and canals creating physical barriers and isolated neighbourhoods.

The vision, articulated in the council's 2020-2025 cohesion plan, is of:

> ***"A strong and cohesive borough, where different parts of the community are connected, and people of all backgrounds feel they belong; participate in community life; and have equal opportunities."***

Case studies

The focus areas are connected people, an involved and empowered community, and bridging the inequalities gap. Housing specific interventions include: “an action to[e]mbed cohesion principles in the regeneration delivery plan so the regeneration projects and programmes help development of positive relationships between people of different backgrounds” and ensure that high-density developments “encourage mixed and balanced communities, providing opportunities for inclusive play and enabling people to be better supported in the different aspects of their everyday life”.

Measurement approach

Firstly, to provide a clear vision, Tower Hamlets adopted the four-part Cantle-Denham definition of social cohesion, which was developed after the 2001 riots in Bradford: a common vision and sense of belonging; that diversity is appreciated and valued; similar life opportunities for all; strong and positive relationships in workplaces, schools, and the wider community (Cantle, 2001; Denham, 2001). This provides a conceptual structure for measurement and policy intervention.

Through its Annual Residents Survey, Tower Hamlets tracks:

- whether residents feel the local area is a place where people from different backgrounds get on well together
- safety perceptions
- satisfaction with the local area as a place to live
- whether residents can influence local decisions
- volunteering rates
- if public services treat all types of people fairly (Tower Hamlets ARS, 2019).

The council also utilises additional existing data sources, including:

- census data, showing language proficiency, ethnic composition, and demographic structure
- index of Multiple Deprivation: spatial patterns of deprivation
- survey of Londoners, administered by the Greater London Authority, which demonstrates links with neighbours, perceptions of borrowing and exchanging favours with neighbours and perceptions of community relationships (GLA, 2019).

The cohesion measurements have directly shaped spatial planning policy, specifically in the Leaside Area Action (LAA)Plan. The council conducted an internal roundtable to discuss the possible policy interventions, attended by the development management team, infrastructure planning team, the public health department and the strategy and policy team. The discussion helped to develop recommendations for the LAA, situated within broader academic research and government priorities, which included:

- Shared public spaces: multi-purpose community hubs accessible beyond specific blocks, based on evidence of high demand.
- Low-traffic neighbourhoods and play streets: temporary street closures for children's play, allowing parent/carer mixing.
- Inter-generational spaces: equipment for older people adjacent to children's playgrounds.
- Varied use of existing spaces: schools, churches, council buildings, repurposed when not serving primary functions.
- Meanwhile uses: abandoned/derelict space activation during development build-out with community involvement.

Tower Hamlets demonstrates that social cohesion measurement through planning requires clear definitional frameworks, multi-method data collection, spatial specificity, and explicit causal logic linking interventions to outcomes. The model requires resources but is efficient when embedded in mainstream planning, relying on cross-departmental collaboration and synthesis of existing data sources. It requires strong political commitment to cohesion as a planning objective, capacity for cross-departmental working, and access to regular survey data on cohesion perceptions.

Austria

Case study 5. Wohnpartner programme and conflict mediation

Wohnpartner is Vienna's community engagement service with 150 employees across 26 offices that supports residents of municipal housing estates through conflict mediation, neighbourhoods activities, and initiatives to foster good neighbourly relations. It operates as a subsidiary of the City of Vienna, serving approximately 220,000 municipal units and 500,000 residents. Wohnpartner employs proactive social infrastructure strategies to strengthen community bonds using qualitative, participatory, and behavioural approaches rather than standardised surveys (Cooperative City, 2023).

Case studies

Measurement approach

Wohnpartner focuses measurement on behavioural data, participatory processes, and qualitative indicators derived from direct engagement with residents (Cooperative City, 2023). Three integrated pillars structure the service: conflict mediation and resolution, preventative community-building activities, and inter-agency coordination connecting residents to broader social supports.

1. Conflict mediation

Conflict mediation is systematically tracked as a core indicator of cohesion, recording dispute types, parties involved, resolution processes, and outcomes. Analysis of cases shows 60-70% involve noise or intergenerational conflicts, particularly in homes built in the 1970s and 1980s with poor soundproofing. Longitudinal tracking allows assessment of changes in community harmony, with declining mediation requests indicating improved cohesion.

2. Community-building participation

Attendance and engagement in community events, resident committees, intercultural exchanges, and collective projects are tracked as behavioural indicators of social connection (Cooperative City, 2023). Participation patterns across demographic groups reveal whether initiatives reach diverse populations and contribute to cohesion.

3. Qualitative assessment and individual support

Direct resident engagement provides qualitative insights into housing conditions, interpersonal tensions, and social integration. Staff document concerns, populations served, and intervention effectiveness, generating a rich evidence base that informs immediate and long-term programmatic decisions.

Independent research assessment: The SORA Study (2011-2013)

The SORA Institute conducted a three-year longitudinal evaluation to assess the quality and effectiveness of Wohnpartner's community work (Wohnpartner Wien, 2015). The research employed mixed methods, including population data analysis, document review, participatory observation at tenant assemblies and festivals, qualitative interviews with employees and residents, and standardised panel surveys of 405 residents across four focus complexes. Each year examined different dimensions: resident empowerment and participation motivation (Year 1), self-sustaining structure development (Year 2), and resident action competence (Year 3). Results were systematically integrated into Wohnpartner's quality improvement through workshop

sessions with staff, informing refinements to community work methods and intervention strategies. Key findings validated Wohnpartner's approach while identifying three resident groups with varying action competence levels and supporting different levels of ongoing facilitation rather than full handover.

Case study 6. Gregorygasse, Vienna - monitoring of cohesion during retrofit

During comprehensive retrofits, such as the Gregorygasse project, Wohnpartner integrated assessment into project management (Green European Journal, 2024). The Gregorygasse retrofit was an urban renewal project of a 1960s-era Gemeindebau that added 44 new attic apartments using prefabricated wooden elements while deeply retrofitting the existing building with insulation, new windows, and upgraded basement ceilings. The intervention achieved an 87% reduction in energy needs, expanded housing supply without demolition or displacement, and included new communal spaces like rooftop terraces and gardens to strengthen community ties. Before works began, staff established a presence and assessed social dynamics; during construction, complaints and mediation cases were systematically tracked, and participation in community activities was monitored. After completion, follow-up observation, conflict data, participation trends, and qualitative feedback are planned to assess the continuity of cohesion.

Wohnpartner exemplifies a qualitative, behaviorally-informed approach to measuring social cohesion, emphasising conflict mediation records as objective indicators of tension, participation in community-building activities as behavioural evidence of engagement, individual counselling and staff observations to capture resident experiences, and tenant empowerment and self-organisation as indicators of social capital. This integrated approach allows the city to pursue physical improvements, such as renewal of Gregorygasse, while protecting and strengthening social bonds across the municipal housing system.

Germany

Case study 7. Hamburg - measuring cohesion during refugee integration

Between 2014 and 2017, Hamburg received over 55,000 asylum seekers, at times over 500 per day. The challenge was to integrate refugees rapidly while maintaining social cohesion and minimising isolation. Hamburg's case is notable for its mature measurement infrastructure that draws on partnerships and established frameworks.

Case studies

Measurement approach

Council of Europe Intercultural Cities Index (2013)

Before the crisis, Hamburg participated in the Intercultural Cities Index, scoring 78% overall and ranking 6th of 56 cities. The framework assessed 69 indicators across 14 domains (commitment, governance, public services, mediation, language, cultural life, etc.), creating baseline data on intercultural policy performance. The results established annual reporting, cross-departmental coordination, and formalized integration monitoring through the Amt für Arbeit und Integration. The Index created infrastructure for ongoing measurement: cross-departmental coordination through the Amt für Arbeit und Integration (Department for Integration).

Hamburg Integration Concept (2013)

Hamburg established comprehensive indicators measuring participation, intercultural opening, and cohesion across seven domains: naturalization and political involvement, language training, education, employment, housing, health, and intercultural opening of administration. The concept included specific targets, gender-disaggregated data, comparative baselines for 2014-2016, and annual monitoring reports to Hamburg Parliament. This created accountability mechanisms linking measurement to policy development.

Bertelsmann Social Cohesion Radar (2017)

Hamburg participated in this three-dimensional national study, conducted by the Bertelsmann Foundation, measuring:

- Social relations – networks, interpersonal trust, and acceptance of diversity.
- Connectedness – identification with society and trust in institutions.
- Focus on the common good – solidarity, civic participation, and adherence to norms.

Surveys of over 5,000 respondents provided subjective cohesion data benchmarked across German states. Hamburg showed strong local cohesion (68% rated it "good") but declining national cohesion scores and rising perceptions of inequality (70% saw economic unfairness).

Updated Integration Concept (2017)

After 2017 Hamburg adopted "masterplan indicators" for refugee integration: annual language training targets, employment and education progression,

and housing transition (62% moved to private rentals within 18 months). These indicators reflected recognition that refugee integration required adapted, time-sensitive measurement beyond emergency tracking.

Crisis-period measurement (2014–2017)

During peak arrivals, monitoring focused on logistics and provision of accommodation, rather than integration outcomes and operated at different scales and timeframes than established frameworks. The Intercultural Cities Index and Integration Concept measured gradual integration processes over annual cycles, while emergency response required daily accommodation decisions for over 500 arrivals. The frameworks' indicators—designed to track language acquisition progression, employment integration trajectories, educational attainment, and social network formation over months and years—did not align with emergency timeframes measuring weeks and days.

Resource allocation during the most intensive period directed all capacity toward preventing homelessness through accommodation construction and immediate service delivery. The established measurement infrastructure continued operating but in parallel with emergency response rather than integrated with it. The measurement frameworks were also designed for populations already integrated into housing, education, and employment systems. Newly arrived refugees in emergency accommodation presented different measurement challenges

Neighbourhood-level monitoring: Hamburg-Lurup

The regeneration of Lurup, a deprived neighbourhood in the city, demonstrates how comprehensive measurement frameworks operate when properly resourced for continuous monitoring. Lurup, with 11,603 residents, exemplifies systematic neighbourhood-level measurement tracking multiple interconnected indicators simultaneously, including demographics, education, welfare usage, and child poverty, identifying concentrations of disadvantage. Ongoing monitoring links data directly to funding allocations and enables evaluation of cohesion-oriented interventions.

The measurement framework enabled planners to understand challenges as interconnected rather than isolated: high child poverty rates limiting access to fee-based activities, educational attainment gaps requiring additional support, low participation in community activities suggesting lack of accessible facilities, and demographic diversity requiring spaces where different age groups and cultural backgrounds could interact.

Key insights on measuring cohesion

Hamburg's experience highlights the importance of a comprehensive, multi-layered measurement infrastructure for understanding social cohesion. Pre-crisis baseline measurements—like Hamburg's 2013 Intercultural Cities Index score of 78%—proved essential for interpreting later changes, making it possible to distinguish crisis impacts from longer-term trends. Multiple frameworks measuring different dimensions complemented each other effectively: the Intercultural Cities Index enabled international benchmarking, the Integration Concept created political accountability through annual parliamentary reporting, the Bertelsmann Radar captured subjective perceptions of trust, belonging, and solidarity, and neighbourhood monitoring like Lurup revealed local disparities. This combination of baseline, objective, subjective, and longitudinal indicators created a robust assessment architecture, though such comprehensive monitoring requires dedicated resources and may be difficult to sustain or replicate widely.

Denmark

Case study 8. Gellerup regeneration, Aarhus

Gellerup, located in the western district of Aarhus, is one of Denmark's largest post-war social housing estates. Built in the late 1960s and early 1970s, it was initially conceived as a modernist vision of affordable urban living, but by the 2000s had become associated with spatial and social segregation. By 2010, the estate faced profound cohesion challenges: unemployment stood at around 60%, crime rates were roughly double the national average, and between 83% and 88% of residents had immigrant or descendant backgrounds from more than 80 countries. Persistent stigmatisation and physical isolation from the wider city deepened divisions and limited social mobility, while public discourse increasingly portrayed Gellerup as an area of concentrated disadvantage. An overarching aim of the project was to increase integration of the area with the rest of the city.

In response, Aarhus Municipality and Brabrand Boligforening, a housing association, launched Denmark's largest regeneration programme, extending from 2010 to 2030. The initiative aims to improve living conditions and strengthen social ties through a combination of physical renewal, social investment, and participatory governance. A central feature is its emphasis on building an agreement with a Community Secretariat that facilitates resident participation to ensure sustainability.

Case studies

Measurement approach

The Gellerup regeneration programme used an integrated system that combines municipal, academic, and community-level data sources to assess progress toward social cohesion.

The Aarhus Compass

Aarhus Kommune's overarching framework for community development monitors social values such as trust, belonging, and active citizenship. It applies across the city but is tailored for vulnerable areas like Gellerup (Aarhus Kommune, 2023).

Integration policy metrics

Social cohesion goals are operationalised through indicators covering employment, education, civic participation, equal opportunities, and cross-cultural engagement. These are monitored collaboratively by the municipality, Community Centre Gellerup, and resident associations using administrative and participatory data (COHSMO Project, 2021).

Population surveys

Large-scale surveys conducted by consultancy Epinion Global in 2016, 2018, and 2020 measure perceived safety, trust, civic participation, and belonging. Oversampling in Gellerup enables longitudinal tracking of change over time (Epinion, 2016–2020).

Community-based monitoring

Community Centre Gellerup functions as a local coordination and measurement hub. It gathers resident feedback through surveys, focus groups, and participation data from social, cultural, and sporting activities. Evaluations have described this as "bottom-linked innovation," combining community ownership with institutional support (SIMPACT Project, 2016; COHSMO Project, 2021).

Institutional collaboration metrics

Measurement extends to the strength of collaboration between schools, police, job centres, and volunteer organisations, recognising that cohesion depends on effective coordination between local institutions (DASH Housing Project, 2023).

Alongside process measures, Aarhus tracks outcome-based cohesion proxies, including crime and anti-social behaviour reduction as evidence of improved

cohesion and community strength; employment and education as pathways to shared prosperity and reduced stratification; health indicators targeting life expectancy parity with city averages; and monitoring of external perceptions and neighbourhood reputation. Monitoring the reduction in stigma is complex and relies primarily on qualitative assessment through consultations and periodic studies. The lack of systematic longitudinal survey instruments with validated scales limits comparability across time periods and neighbourhoods, though qualitative methods effectively capture nuanced perception changes.

The Gellerup model represents a participatory and longitudinal approach to measuring social cohesion, combining quantitative and qualitative evidence. Residents are directly involved in shaping indicators and interpreting data, while academic and municipal partners provide external validation. Integration of administrative data, surveys, and local observation allows the municipality to adjust interventions over time. This combination of participation, multi-level data, and sustained monitoring makes the Gellerup programme a particularly comprehensive local system for assessing social cohesion.

Case study 9. Mjølnerparken, Copenhagen

Mjølnerparken, a 1980s Nørrebro estate with 1,000 residents across 560 apartments, was designated a "hard ghetto" in 2018 under a government framework based on 2010 baseline data: 53% aged 18-64 not in work/education, 3.3% adults with criminal convictions, and over 80% ethnic minority population. National policy mandated reducing public housing in these areas to below 40% by 2030 through forced sale and demolition to break cycles of concentrated disadvantage, improve labour market outcomes through better network diversity, and reduce crime.

Officials in Copenhagen framed the intervention as essential for long-term resident wellbeing despite short-term disruption, maintaining that dispersal would ultimately benefit displaced residents through access to less stigmatised neighbourhoods and improved employment prospects. However, this rationale faced contestation from residents and housing advocates who argued that functional integration could improve without displacing existing communities and that strong social ties were undervalued by policymakers.

Measurement approach

The City of Copenhagen developed sophisticated systematic measurement tools applicable across neighbourhoods, including Mjølnerparken. These tools include:

Case studies

The integration barometer

The Integration Barometer serves as Copenhagen's primary tool for tracking integration outcomes and social cohesion indicators across ten neighbourhoods. The structure comprises an open, publicly accessible data platform with transparent reporting over six key domains (employment, education, housing, safety, culture/leisure, health). It underpins a traffic-light rating system indicating neighbourhood performance levels and annual updates enabling temporal comparison.

The social cohesion indicators measured include employment and labour market participation by ethnic origin, educational attainment and language proficiency, safety, trust, and belonging perceptions, local network strength and cross-ethnic interaction, civic engagement and association participation, involvement in neighbourhood/municipal processes, and feelings of acceptance, inclusion, and exclusion.

Copenhagen StatBank

This tool, held by the city government, integrates municipal registers, Statistics Denmark, and local surveys and enables analysis by neighbourhood, ethnicity, age, gender, longitudinal tracking, and benchmarking across districts. It covers employment, education, housing, crime, health, civic participation, language proficiency, and community organisation involvement.

Application to Mjølnerparken

Barometer data was used to target Mjølnerparken for regeneration, using criteria like low employment, high crime, concentrated ethnic minority population, and low perceived safety in municipal surveys. This shaped social master plans for the area but also supported systematic tracking of improvements: decline in unemployment levels, crime reduction, violent incidents decreased, perception of safety improved, and youth engagement increased.

Discussion and development of a typology of social cohesion measurement

These case studies suggest five distinct models for measuring social cohesion in housing. These differ in resource demands, sustainability, housing contexts, and relevance to Irish local authority practice. Recognising these distinctions enables authorities to select approaches suited to their circumstances rather than adopting models designed for other contexts.

The embedded model

Vienna's Wohnpartner programme illustrates an embedded service model, where cohesion measurement is built into social support delivery rather than conducted as a separate research activity. Continuous data are generated through mediation logs, participation tracking, and pre- and post-intervention surveys around housing retrofits. With 150 staff across all 23 districts, Wohnpartner combines district-level presence with citywide coordination, focusing on both conflict resolution and positive dimensions of cohesion—mutual support, belonging, and participation.

This model requires substantial, permanent municipal investment but offers strong sustainability because measurement is part of routine operations. It depends on Vienna's distinctive housing context: over 40% of the city's housing stock is municipally owned, providing both the scale and institutional capacity to sustain such infrastructure.

For Irish authorities, replicating this scale is unrealistic given resource constraints and a smaller social housing sector. However, its underlying principle (embedding measurement in service delivery) is relevant given the introduction of Integration Teams. Systematically recording the work of community development officers, tenant liaison staff, and integration teams could yield valuable cohesion data without creating new structures, moving incrementally toward an embedded service approach.

The partnership model

Utrecht's Plan Einstein, Aarhus's Gellerup regeneration, and Delft's Kuiperwijk Noord project exemplify a partnership model, built on collaboration between municipalities, housing associations, NGOs, residents, and academic partners. These pilots combine mixed-methods evaluation, with strong community participation in defining indicators. Academic partners bring methodological rigour, independence, and capacity that municipalities often lack.

Resources are intensive during the funded phase, typically supported by external funding (from European, national, or foundation programmes). However, the sustainability of monitoring is weak once this funding

ends. Utrecht's experience is illustrative: during the 2016–2019 EU Urban Innovative Actions project, comprehensive evaluation tracked hundreds of participants and multiple indicators. When funding ceased, activity contracted and ceased to be ongoing or systematic. Officials noted that ensuring safe spaces and managing relations took precedence over continued measurement when resources were tight.

This model suits social housing areas under regeneration or facing acute integration pressures where intensive measurement can be justified. For Ireland, it offers moderate applicability. With adequate resourcing, Local Economic and Community Plans could structure similar partnerships among local authorities, housing bodies, community organisations, and universities. Utrecht's experience underscores the need for either sustained funding or explicit planning for scaled-down funding measurement.

The municipal data infrastructure model

Copenhagen's Integration Barometer, Aarhus's Compass framework, and Hamburg's integration monitoring represent municipal data infrastructure models. These establish citywide measurement systems, based on research conducted or commissioned locally, that integrate existing data from government bodies and published sets like the census, standardised indicators for comparison across neighbourhoods and over time. Results can be shared through dashboards or traffic-light systems.

This model requires medium-to-high resources for data integration, analysis, and reporting, but is cost-effective compared with more bespoke research projects. Sustainability is strong, as the system becomes embedded in municipal operations and continues beyond project cycles. It works across mixed housing types, particularly in cities managing ongoing integration challenges.

For Irish authorities, this model offers high potential but requires collective rather than individual effort. Shared infrastructure across the 31 authorities could draw on CSO data, administrative records, and coordinated surveys, providing comparative benchmarking and analytical capacity none could sustain alone. Realisation would need some form of centralised coordination, through the LGMA or CCMA, agreement on indicators, and joint investment.

The pragmatic integration model

Tower Hamlets illustrates the pragmatic integration model, embedding cohesion indicators in existing surveys and planning processes. The borough combines census data, administrative records, and its Annual Residents Survey, adding cohesion-related questions and convening cross-departmental workshops to interpret results. This approach links

measurement directly to spatial planning, shaping decisions about shared spaces, low-traffic areas, intergenerational facilities, and interim uses of vacant sites.

Resource requirements are low, relying on existing surveys and staff time rather than new research teams. Sustainability is moderate, dependent on maintaining survey mechanisms and interdepartmental collaboration. The model suits diverse, mixed-tenure urban areas with complex social dynamics.

For Irish local authorities, this is the most immediately feasible approach. Many already conduct consultations for Local Economic and Community Plans or housing satisfaction surveys. Adding a short set of cohesion questions and convening quarterly cross-departmental meetings (housing, community development, integration) could generate baseline data and inform policy decisions. This pragmatic approach aligns with current capacity constraints while laying the groundwork for more sophisticated measurement in future.

The cooperative governance model

Mehr als Wohnen and Marmalade Lane (Cambridge) represent the cooperative governance model, where measurement arises from resident-led governance. Assemblies and working groups collect participation and satisfaction data as part of daily management. Cooperatives track use of shared spaces and can commission external evaluations using frameworks such as the HACT Social Value Bank.

Resources are moderate, shared among residents rather than drawn from public budgets. Sustainability is strong because measurement supports cooperative decision-making, though external evaluations depend on separate funding. However, these models rely on self-selected communities willing to invest financially and socially, limiting transferability. High measured cohesion may reflect self-selection rather than replicable design.

For Ireland, direct applicability is limited given the minimal cooperative housing tradition and barriers to entry for most social housing tenants. Nonetheless, the principle of resident participation is valuable. Strengthening tenant associations, involving residents in defining indicators, and granting genuine influence over estate management could embed participatory measurement within existing frameworks.

Patterns across models

Three key patterns emerge from this analysis.

First, no model achieves low resource use, strong sustainability, and high measurement depth simultaneously. Partnership and pilots provide depth and insight but are short-lived, embedded services achieve sustainability but demand infrastructure, pragmatic integration is feasible but limited in sophistication, municipal data infrastructure balances these moderately but needs collective investment, and cooperative models excel in niche contexts but lack scalability.

Second, nearly all sustainable models rely on pragmatic foundations. Even ambitious systems are built on routine operations and administrative data.

Finally, context determines suitability. Embedded services fit large municipal housing systems; partnership pilots suit intensive interventions; municipal data infrastructure supports cities managing ongoing integration challenges; pragmatic integration fits resource-constrained authorities; and cooperative governance applies in self-selected communities. Transposing models across incompatible contexts risks confusion, duplication and wasted resources.

Conclusion

The answer to the question this research set out to address is that authorities in several jurisdictions do measure social cohesion in housing contexts, in various ways. However, the practice is far from universal or standardised, and sustainability remains a persistent challenge.

Authorities in several jurisdictions successfully measure social cohesion in housing, with Denmark and the Netherlands showing particularly systematic approaches. However, this remains the exception rather than the rule. Most measurement occurs during special funding periods and rarely continues with the same rigour afterwards. This pattern directly mirrors the Irish situation, where comprehensive measurement competes with immediate service delivery needs and choices about resource allocation, as discussed in the interview section of this paper.

The most effective approaches do not treat cohesion measurement as a standalone technical exercise but integrate it into democratic housing governance, multi-stakeholder partnerships, and place-based regeneration strategies addressing housing alongside community infrastructure. However, this holistic approach requires time, integrated working, and sustained commitment and resourcing.

Central government imposes housing delivery targets, but not cohesion targets, and the structural separation between housing and community departments in Irish local authorities makes coordination more challenging. The focus of housing teams on delivery while community teams handle engagement mirrors patterns elsewhere but may be particularly problematic given current crisis conditions and the scale of accommodation pressures.

Social cohesion resists simple definition, involves multiple interacting factors, and operates on long timescales exceeding typical political and funding cycles. These are intrinsic characteristics of the phenomenon, not problems that better methodology can fully resolve.

The international cases reveal multiple competing frameworks with no universal definition. Without shared understanding across departments and with elected members and communities, different actors may work towards different implicit goals. What matters is making explicit what cohesion means in specific contexts, whose definition counts in contested situations, and being transparent about attribution limitations.

Practical, context-specific approaches using existing tools are most sustainable, replicable and comparable across places. Given resource constraints facing most authorities, measurement approaches that leverage administrative data already collected, embed indicators in existing surveys, apply standardised frameworks with established proxies, and keep methods simple enough for routine replication are more likely to continue beyond

initial pilots than complex bespoke evaluations requiring dedicated research teams.

Partnerships are essential infrastructure for cohesion measurement. Very few authorities successfully measure cohesion independently. Effective approaches consistently involve academic-municipal partnerships for methodological expertise, multi-stakeholder collaborations for data integration, cross-sectoral working for holistic assessment, and external validation for credibility. Building these networks is as important as developing instruments for measurement.

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